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MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES

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THE BATTLE OF THE PLAYERS AND POETS, 1761-1766

The middle of the eighteenth century was a period of successful adaptations and few original plays, of mediocre playwrights and brilliant actors. We have forgotten the words of Arthur Murphy and George Colman the elder, but Mrs. Cibber, Macklin, and Garrick still live in the traditions of the English stage. Yet it was a time of very close connection between the people on the boards and those in the audience—a time of strong personal antagonisms that, fostered on the stage and in pamphlets, grew frequently to unwarranted proportions. The interest in the players was absorbing; the rivalry among the theatres was intense.

In 1760, only two regular play-houses were open in London: Drury Lane and Covent Garden. There were also the unlicensed theatre in Goodman's Fields, and the Little Theatre in the Haymarket,¹ where Samuel Foote, in order to evade the Licensing Act, advertised his plays by announcements like the following:

"Mr. Foote presents his compliments to his friends and the public, and desires them to drink tea at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket every morning, at playhouse prices." (Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 247, note.)

Much of the interest in the stage was due probably to the rise of mimicry and caricature in the theatre, fostered to a great degree by Foote. In 1760, in *The Minor*, he made sport of the Methodists; in 1762, he ridiculed the Cock Lane Ghost affair, but omitted the satire on Doctor Johnson, when that great man threatened to cudgel anyone who made fun of him on the stage.

The history of the London stage in this period centers, however, in David Garrick. His first piece, a sketch called *Lethe*, was pro-

¹ Wright, T., *Caricature History of the Georges, or Annals of the House of Hanover*, London, 1868, pp. 236-7.

duced at Drury Lane, in 1740. In March, 1741, he took the place of Yates as Harlequin at Goodman's Fields, and in the following October wrote to his brother, "Last night I played Richard ye Third to ye Surprise of Everybody."² His success was immediate; carriages thronged from St. James's and Grosvenor Square to the unlicensed theatre at Goodman's Fields where Garrick was playing. He joined the Drury Lane Company, and Quin, his great rival, opposed him at Covent Garden. Charles Fleetwood, who, at that time, held the patent of Drury Lane Theatre, alienated many of the players by introducing tumblers and rope-dancers on its stage. At last his company revolted under the leadership of Garrick and Macklin. On account of the Lord Chamberlain's refusal to give them a new patent, they were forced, however, to come to an agreement with Fleetwood. In 1746, Garrick joined Rich in the Covent Garden Company. Fleetwood, in the meantime, had sold his interest in Drury Lane, which then came under Lacy's management. Rich had the better company, with Garrick, Quin, Woodward, Mrs. Cibber, and Mrs. Pritchard. He treated Garrick, however, with such indifference that in the summer of 1747 the great actor left, to become joint owner and stage-manager of Drury Lane. Some of the best actors from Covent Garden, including Mrs. Cibber and Mrs. Pritchard, followed him to his new theatre. On account of various quarrels, Barry and Mrs. Cibber left his company in 1749. This made Covent Garden again a dangerous rival.

The rivalry between the theatres was embittered by attacks upon Garrick. As manager of Drury Lane, he was censured by some of the critics because he was slow in producing new plays. Excitement rose to a high pitch in 1755, when he brought out "The Chinese Festival," a great spectacle, for which, unfortunately, it was necessary to employ a number of French dancers. Feeling against the French, always strong, ran especially high at that time, when, both in America and Europe, there was open hostility between the two peoples. A mob tried to break up the performance on the first night, but, with the aid of the aristocracy, Garrick was able to check them. The conflict between the two parties lasted for five nights; on the sixth, the rioters, carrying all before them, destroyed everything on which they could lay their hands.

² Hedgcock, F. A. *A Cosmopolitan Actor, David Garrick and his French Friends*. New York, 1912, p. 35.

Nor was the attack limited to mob violence. In 1755, in reference to Garrick's introduction of French actors, there appeared, for instance, "*The Nowiad: An Heroic Poem*. Humbly inscribed to the most renowned *Tom Thumb* the Great, Patentee and grand Manager of the *Old-New English-French Theatre*: With Notes historical and critical. By a Spectator."³ Two years later *The Monthly Review* (vol. 16, p. 183) mentions *The Age of Dulness: A Satire*, which commented upon the middle-rank actors and poets of the time. For a number of years, both Garrick and his fellow-players were the prey of satirists in prose and verse.

Of all the attacks upon the actors, the most noteworthy was *The Rosciad*, by Charles Churchill, which, published in 1761, brought in its wake a flood of inferior critical and satirical verse. It was preceded by *The Actor*, written by one of Churchill's friends, Robert Lloyd, but was much more personal in its application.

In brief, the plan of the work is as follows: The London actors are all aspirants for the chair of Roscius, the great Roman actor. Shakespeare and Ben Jonson are appointed judges to decide among them as they pass in review. As the actors appear, Churchill characterizes them, points out their defects, and, if possible, praises their merits. Last of all, Garrick comes, and the judges are unanimous in awarding to him the coveted place.

The objects of Churchill's criticism may, in general, be grouped under three heads: bearing, feeling, and enunciation. He sympathized strongly with Garrick's efforts to develop naturalness of acting, and was particularly severe in his denunciation of those who were artificial in their manner. Davies, for example, an inferior actor,

mouths a sentence as curs mouth a bone.*

When a certain Jackson appeared, Churchill exclaimed contemptuously,

List to that voice—did ever Discord hear
Sounds so well fitted to her untuned ear?

(*The Rosciad*, ll. 429-430.)

The actresses, in most instances, met with Churchill's approval:

³ *The Monthly Review*, vol. 13, p. 459.

⁴ *The Rosciad*, l. 322. (In the Aldine Edition of the Poetical Works of Charles Churchill, edited by W. Tooke. In three volumes, London, 1844.)

Miss Pope, one of the great stage heroines of the day, Mrs. Cibber, and Mrs. Pritchard, all received unqualified praise. Mrs. Pritchard's acting of Lady Macbeth was especially noteworthy:

When she to murder whets the tim'rous thane
I feel ambition rush through every vein;
Persuasion hangs upon her daring tongue,
My heart grows flint, and every nerve's new strung.
(*The Rosciad*, 815-818.)

Garrick, as the hero of the poem, deserves the choice of the judges, for

. . . when, from Nature's pure and genuine source,
These strokes of acting flow with generous force,
When in the features all the soul's portray'd
And passions, such as Garrick's, are display'd,
To me they seem from quickest feelings caught,
Each start is nature, and each pause is thought.
(*The Rosciad*, 1049-1054.)

The publication of *The Rosciad* took the actors by surprise. It did not need any advertisement, for the players themselves spread the news. Davies, the author of the *Life of Garrick*, gives an account of the satire upon them. Barry, Woodward, and Mossop were in Ireland at the time, and first learned of the attack through a Dublin edition of *The Rosciad*. "Havard was more offended than became a man so calm and dispassionate. Rose pleaded guilty, and laughed at his punishment over a glass with his friend Bonnel Thornton. Sparks was too much a man of the world to be hurt by a poetical arrow. King was displeased, but King kept his temper. Shuter, out of revenge, got very merry with the poet. Foote, who lived by degrading all characters, was outrageously offended. Whether there was a particular stroke, which he felt more than was known to others, I cannot tell; but he was extremely violent in his anger. He wrote a prose dialogue, wherein he lampooned Churchill and Lloyd; I believe he was too wise to publish it. I remember that, with his usual alliteration of which he was uncommonly fond, he called Churchill the *Clumsy curate of Clapham*."⁵

The public rather enjoyed the fun. The actors, for so long a

⁵ Davies, T. *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick, Esq.*; in two volumes. London, 1784. Fourth Edition, vol. I, pp. 329-330.

time, had used their privilege of caricaturing prominent people upon the stage, that the whole town was glad to see the tables turned, and the players running around "like so many stricken deer." (Davies, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 321.)

Oliver Goldsmith, in his *Citizen of the World*, gives an interesting satirical account of the literary warfare that ensued. He says, in part:

An important literary debate at present engrosses the attention of the town. It is carried on with sharpness, and a proper share of this epigrammatical fury. An author, it seems, has taken an aversion to the faces of several players, and has written verses to prove his dislike: the players fall upon the author, and assure the town he must be dull, and their faces must be good, because he wants a dinner; a critic comes to the poet's assistance, asserting that the verses were perfectly original, and so smart that he could never have written them without the assistance of friends; the friends, upon this, arraign the critic, and plainly prove the verses to be all the author's own. . . . The town, without siding with any, views the combat in suspense.⁶

Since the first edition of *The Rosciad* was anonymous, the reviewers were uncertain to whom to ascribe the authorship. *The Critical Review* suggested that it might be the product of Colman, Thornton, or Lloyd, or to any one of them (vol. II, p. 212). Lloyd immediately denied that he was the author, and in an evening paper published a fable against the Critical Reviewers, who had been very severe in their account of the work (*The Critical Review*, vol. II, pp. 339 and 209-210). This fable proved to be the forerunner of many other works of a more or less abusive nature—many of them due, no doubt, to the outraged feelings of the lesser actors and their friends.

Goldsmith notes that the epigram was one of the keenest weapons employed in the controversy. As an illustration he gives the following:

An Epigram

Addressed to the Gentlemen reflected on in the 'Rosciad,' a Poem, by the Author.

Worry'd by debts and past all hopes of bail
His pen he prostitutes, t'avoid a goal.—Roscom.

⁶ Goldsmith, O. *Miscellaneous Works*. Including a Variety of Pieces now first collected by James Prior. Four volumes. New York, 1850, vol. XI, pp. 445-446.

Let not the hungry Bavius' angry stroke
 Awake resentment, or your age provoke;
 But, pitying his distress, let virtue* shine,
 And, giving each your bounty,† let him dine:
 For, thus retain'd, as learned counsel can,
 Each case, however bad, he'll new japan:
 And, by a quick transition, plainly show
 'Twas no defect of yours, but pockets low,
 That caus'd his putrid kennel to o'erflow.

* Charity. † Settled at one shilling, the price of the poem.

(Goldsmith, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 448).

Goldsmith quotes a second epigram which refers to the doubts of the reviewers in regard to the authorship of *The Rosciad*:

To G. C. and R. L. [George Colman the elder, and Robert Lloyd.]

'Twas you, or I, or he, or all together,
 'Twas one, both, three of them, they know not whether;
 This I believe, between us great or small,
 You, I, he, wrote it not—'twas Churchill's all.

(Goldsmith, *op. cit.*, p. 449.)

From every side epistles, odes, and satires kept flowing in: Lloyd, in addition to the Advertisement in the papers, printed *An Epistle to C. Churchill, Author of the Rosciad*, in which he complained of the decay of criticism, lashed the truculent character of the age, and praised his friend. One D. Hayes published an attack upon Churchill and Lloyd, entitled *An Epistle to C. Churchill, Author of the Rosciad*. Still another poem was *The Retort*, which *The Monthly Review* praises as better than many of the others (vol. 25, p. 477).

The London Magazine, in March, 1761, printed the following satiric epigram:

I hear the r——d Ch——ll's praise,
 Fam'd for the ivy and the bays;
 I read his heav'n inspired rhymes,
 That might adorn th' Apostles times;
 Where, meek and with a Christian spirit,
 He justly weighs each player's factors,
 Corrects the actresses—and actors.
 Oh! to reform this wicked age,
 Make him a—b—p of the stage,
 That none presume to act again,
 But those his grace is pleas'd t'ordain;
 So shall the church in all excell,
 And triumph o'er the gates of hell.

(*The London Magazine for 1761*, p. 163.)

The Anti-Rosciad. By the Author. *Poenum habet in cornu longe fuge.* Hor., appeared in April, 1761, written probably by Thomas Morell. In ten pages the author replied to Churchill's attack on the players, and attempted to answer his criticism. He hinted that the author of *The Rosciad* was actuated by motives of spite and self-interest, which led him to attack the players simply to win favors from the manager.

Arthur Murphy, the playwright and actor, in his nauseous *Ode to the Naiads of Fleet-Ditch*, compares Churchill to a pickpocket:

This last person's [i. e., Churchill's] hand has felt in his pocket twice in a very short time; in the *Rosciad* it was but a dip, and away; but as if this astonishing genius, who has lately amazed mankind, had improved in his trade, in his *Apology* he has attempted to make an entire rummage. (*An Ode to the Naiads of Fleet-Ditch.* Advertisement, p. 11. Churchill had written a second poem called *The Apology*, for which see below.)

The poem itself is a disgusting emanation from the sewers with which it deals. Later in the year, however, Murphy published *The Examiner*,⁷ a satire that contains a further, but more sane discussion of the war of the poets. He is severe, but not scurrilous in his treatment of Churchill, Lloyd, and Colman, and has risen far above his level in the earlier work.

A large part of Murphy's *Ode* is unquotable, as is also Edward Thompson's *Meretriciad*, which appeared in September, 1761, a catalogue of the frail beauties of London. Incidentally, it praises Churchill in extravagant terms:

Ch——'s the muse, who dare aspire to rise,
And pluck the di'monds from the starry skies.

(*The Meretriciad*, p. 2.)

In a long prose tract, *The Churchilliad: or a Few Modest Questions Proposed to the Reverend Author of the Rosciad*, 1761, we have an overdrawn but not impossible picture of the satirist:

I have often look'd upon those shoulders, and the pedestals you wear for legs, with an eye of envy, and as for that little natural imperfection in your face, which the faculty call a convulsion of the part, proceeding from some irregularity in muscles, I have observed with the greatest pity. (*The Churchilliad*, pp. 29-30.)

⁷ At the head of the poem is the title, *The Expostulation*. The title was changed to *The Examiner* to avoid confusion with another *Expostulation* written by Murphy's enemies.

The author suggests that hunger prompted *The Rosciad*, and tells a story of Churchill's keeping two bodies waiting in the church for burial while he was watching a play from the orchestra of the Drury Lane Theatre. It would seem that a French Protestant read the burial service:

And what could it signify to the dead to be buried by a French protestant, who could not read a word of English? Was not he [i. e., Churchill] lowering the insolent pride of a set of people, who had the impudence to dine upon *fish* and *fowls* in a superb *apartment*, while he was forced to dart into a cellar in St. Giles's where the knives and forks are chained to the table, for fear the company should steal them, and there dine voluptuously upon ox cheek? (*The Churchilliad*, p. 12.)

Churchill, in the meantime, had not been entirely silent. In *The Apology*, a poem published in April, 1761, he assailed *The Critical Review* for its harsh reception of his earlier poem, and dashed Garrick from the pedestal on which he had placed him the month before. He sneered at the strolling player who had become the haughty monarch of the London stage; he mocked those petty satellites who trembled at the tyrant's frown. Whether a quarrel had arisen between the two, or whether Churchill wrote this poem merely to gain more money, we cannot tell, but his attack must have been very disconcerting to Garrick, who was being assailed from another quarter at the same time.

A certain Fitzpatrick, the leader of some of the mob opposition to Garrick, had been attacking him in a series of letters first published in *The Craftsman* and then as *An Inquiry into the real Merit of a certain popular Performer . . .* "the overflowings of spleen, ignorance, conceit, and disappointment" (*The Critical Review*, vol. 11, p. 80). Garrick replied in June, 1761, with *The Fribbleriad*, a satirical poem, in which Fitzpatrick appears as Figzig, the chairman of the Panfribblerium, where all the Fribbles are plotting the manager's destruction. Among the Fribbles, but more open than they in his attack, is Churchill, whose one hand holds a pen, the other, a club (*The Fribbleriad*, p. 16).

An Epistle to the Author of the Rosciad and the Apology, 1761, a poem published in answer to Churchill's first two works, is a meek exhortation to the satirist, advising him to sing the "Moral song," and leave lampoon to snarling Critics.

In June, 1761, was published another satire, *The Scrubs of Parnassus: or All in the Wrong*, of which the Critical Reviewers

give a brief account, again expressing their utter weariness of the warfare that had already continued several months and was showing no signs of coming to an end (*The Critical Review*, vol. 11, p. 495).

On November 24, 1761, appeared in *The London Chronicle*, a poem called 'All in the Wrong.' *A Poetical Essay Humbly addressed to the literary game-cocks of the present Age*, taking its title, perhaps, from Murphy's play, *All in the Wrong*, which was being performed in November, 1761.⁸ It censures the disputants on both sides, and urges them to follow Horace, rather than Juvenal:

All in the wrong the bick'ring bards I deem,
Who quick, and quarrelsome, and choak'd with phlegm,
Against their rival-brethren of the quill,
With mean, illib'ral taunts, their poems fill;
And much good verse throw foolishly away,
A temper touch'd with malice to display.
Ye Murphys, Churchills, Lloyds, for shame agree.
(*The London Chronicle*, vol. x, pp. 508-509.)

It is interesting to note that the reviewers, after reading such works as those I have mentioned, were quite ready to acknowledge Churchill as the master, and the other poets as imitators. They had criticized him harshly, and they would do so again in the latter part of his career, but, for instance, in its account of *The Four Farthing-Candles, A Satire*. Inscribed to A. D., Esq., *The Monthly Review* comments:

There are some smart things in his Poem; but his denying the applauded Author of the Rosciad any share of genius, is enough to make every discerning Reader question that of our Satirist himself, or, at least to pronounce him utterly destitute of candor. Can anything be more absurd than the following lines, applied to Mr. Churchill?

When a rough unwieldy wight
Turns Bard—inspir'd—by nought but spite,
Tho' here and there a *stolen* thought
May prove the Blockhead not untaught,
Yet, by his aukward hobbling gait
We easily discern the cheat;
And in each spleen-fraught line can trace
His want of Genius, as of Grace.

(*The Monthly Review*, vol. 62, p. 231.)

⁸ *The London Chronicle*, vol. x, pp. 508-509.

Even from the brief extracts that I have quoted, it is possible to get a fairly good idea of the general quality of these polemics. In most cases they are simply rhymed and abusive prose lampoon. They lack all pretense to humor or to imagination. Had a great poet consented to enter the conflict, either on the side of actors or of Churchill, it might have been possible to have a revival of meritorious satire. As it was, the stream of abuse became thinner and more worthless until at last it vanished in the underground channels of Grub Street. As it flowed, it divided into two branches, one of which continued the quarrel of the poets, and the other led into imitations of *The Rosciad*.

Of the first group I shall mention only four, (1) *The Triumvirate: a poetical Portrait, Taken from the Life, and Finished after the Manner of Swift*, was the cause of a lament by *The Monthly Review* over the pernicious war of the bards:

We are sorry to find that the literary heats which so much interested the attention of the public last winter, are likely to be revived in this, and that the improvement of real and useful knowledge must again give way to private animosities; which, as they have been hitherto managed, are not less prejudicial to the interest and characters of the parties concerned, than troublesome and unprofitable to the public.

(*The Monthly Review*, vol. 25, p. 319.)

(2) An Epistle to * * * *. *A. M. Student of Christ Church*, written in November, 1761, by a certain Mr. Woodhull. This, according to *The Monthly Review*, was considered influenced by *The Rosciad* and *The Apology*, but not so "nervously expressed" (*The Monthly Review*, vol. 25, p. 330).

(3) *The Muse's Advice. Addressed to the Poets of the Age*, by Mr. Woty, who tries to mediate between the opposing camps of angry poets. *The Monthly Review* is apprehensive "lest the simple youth be rewarded with a broken head for his officiousness" (vol. 25, p. 479).

(4) *Day: An Epistle to C. Churchill*; By G. Freeman, Esq., of the Inner Temple. This is perhaps as far as we should trace this phase of the quarrel, since *Day* has been rightly called "a maggot bred in the corruption of those wounds occasioned by a late literary skirmish" (*The Critical Review*, vol. 13, p. 362).

Shortly after the publication of *The Rosciad*, it was rumored that Churchill was about to publish a *Smithfield Rosciad*, directed

against the minor actors. This rumor spread consternation among those of little reputation, for, although Macklin could laugh at any attacks that might be made upon him, the lesser men felt that another attack might ruin their chances of success. One Davis, an inferior player, wrote Churchill a long letter, couched in terms of the greatest humility, asking to be spared from the satiric pen. Churchill's reply was brief and contemptuous:

Sir,

From whom you have obtained your information concerning my next publication I know not, nor indeed am solicitous to know, neither can I think you intitled, as you express it, to an exemption from any severity, as you express it, which gentlemen of your profession, as you express it, are subject to.

I am your humble Servant,

Charles Churchill.

P. S. Defects (perhaps natural as you express it) are secure from my own feelings without any application.

Friday 9.

(*The London Magazine* for 1763, p. 500.)

The Smithfield Rosciad, which Davis feared, did appear, but was not written by Churchill. It is dull in spite of frequent borrowings from *The Rosciad*, and its attempt to parody it. It

is as inferior to Churchill's *Rosciad*, as a play at Bartholomew Fair is to a play at Drury-Lane. (*The Critical Review*, vol. 17, pp. 75-76.)

Among the other immediate imitations were *The Rosciad of Covent Garden* and *The Battle of the Players*. *The Monthly Review* notes that the former of these works was decidedly inferior to *The Rosciad*:

This unequal imitator of a late celebrated piece, abuses the *lower* actors of Covent-Garden Theatre, with more than Churchill's ill-nature; and praises the better sort with less, far less, than Churchill's Poetry.

(Vol. 26, p. 231.)

The author of *The Battle of the Players* was more ambitious. Not content with lampooning the players in one theatre, he tells us in his title that he introduces "*the Characters of all the Actors and Actresses on the English Stage: With an impartial Estimate of their respective Merits.*" Although it professes to be an imitation of Swift's prose, it shows a clear influence of the general

method of *The Rosciad*. (Noted in *The Critical Review*, vol. 13, p. 268.)

Long after the storm of lampoon aroused by the publication of *The Rosciad* had died away, various poets of third or fourth rank, taking Churchill's work as their model, tried their hand at dramatic criticism. In July, 1766, Churchill and others were interviewed in the Elysian Fields by the Shade of Quin, which later appears to Roscius and recounts its adventures in *The Interview; or Jack Falstaff's Ghost, a Poem*. Inscribed to David Garrick, Esq. (*The Monthly Review*, vol. 35, p. 79.)

In the following year, there was a revival of the criticism of the players. This petty quarrel centered in a poem called *Thespis: or a Critical Examination into the Merits of all the principal Performers belonging to Drury-Lane Theatre*. The reviewer remarks:

. . . The Author of *Thespis*, which may be considered as a supplement to Churchill's poem, is still more ill-natured. He has all the scurrility of his predecessor, without his fire and force: his virulence, without his poetry. Not that we think him inferior to the writer of the *Rosciad*, in point of harmony; for, in this respect, scarce any mere rhimester of his day was his inferior; but we have not here the concise, nervous expression; the bold, energetic thought; the elevated, manly genius; the natural, and even the becoming complexion for satire, from whence the late celebrated bard has been justly stiled [sic] the Juvenal of the present times. (*The Monthly Review*, vol. 35, p. 388.)

This was followed by a series of similar pamphlets, which, in general, I shall list without comment. They are all about equally insignificant as literature, but have some interest as indicative of the spirit of the times:

1. *Anti-Thespis: or a Vindication of the principal Performers at Drury-Lane Theatre, from the false Criticisms, illiberal Abuse, and Gross Misrepresentation, of the Author of a Poem, lately published, entitled Thespis*. (*The Monthly Review*, vol. 36, p. 79.)

2. *Thespis: or a Critical Examination into the Merits of all the principal Performers belonging to Covent-Garden Theatre. Book the Second*. By Hugh Kelly, Author of the *First*. (*Ibid.*, p. 162.)

3. *The Rescue: or Thespian Scourge, Being a critical Enquiry into the Merit of a Poem entitled Thespis*. (*Ibid.*)

4. *The Rational Rosciad. In Two Parts. I On the Stage in general and particularly, and on the Merits of the most celebrated Dramatic Writers. II On the Merits of the principal Performers of both Theatres*. By F—B—L—. (*Ibid.*, p. 163.)

5. *The Impartialist*. A Poem. The author, T. Underwood, follows Churchill, but, as the reviewer remarks, *non passibus aequis*. (*Ibid.*, p. 239.)

6. *Momus, a critical Examination into the Merits of the Performers, and Comic Pieces, at the Theatre-Royal in the Haymarket*. (*Ibid.*, vol. 37, p. 75.)

7. *Atys: or a Letter to Momus, on his late Descent among Mortals;—or, rather, to the mistaken illiberal Mortal whose lucrative Views have engaged him to wear that Mask, to cover Falshood [sic], Ingratitude, Malevolence, etc., etc.* (*Ibid.*, p. 148.)

8. *The Theatres: a poetical Dissection*. By Sir Nicholas Nipclose, Bart. (*Ibid.*, vol. 45, p. 508.)

This is one of the last of the direct descendants of *The Rosciad*, but the fashion of examining the merits of various persons spread from an examination of the stage to an examination of almost everything under heaven. The Aldermen, the Court, Parliament, and even the Church, came beneath the lash of the satirist. During the period of the American Revolution, the satirists found a more fertile field in the political affairs of the kingdom, and the players were unmolested. The *Parody on the Rosciad of Churchill* that appeared in 1781 resembled the earlier poem only in name. (*The Monthly Review*, vol. 64, p. 232.)

Such was the "Calmuc-tribe of authors who are to be regarded as the brood of Churchill's poem, and the heirs of his Billingsgate fortunes."⁹ Churchill did not create the fashion of attacking the players, but he made his criticism of them so keen and forceful that he kept the style alive some twenty years after it would normally have ceased to exist. Unfortunately for the literature of the period, only the lesser poets entered the controversy—many of them doubtless the very actors he had flayed. In consequence, we have a great mass of verse that apparently aroused a vast deal of contemporary interest, but that is practically void of all literary merit.

Formal satire in the manner of Pope was dying; Churchill could only delay the end. His followers, imitating him poorly, carried on the warfare for which he was so largely responsible. The new school of Post-Revolutionary satirists, however, turned to different metres and a lighter touch. The words of Peter Pindar, describing his own work indicate the change:

⁹ *The Monthly Review*, vol. 49, p. 230.

To mine, Charles Churchill's rage was downright rancour:
 He was a first-rate man-of-war to *me*,
 Thund'ring amidst a high tempestuous sea;
 I'm a small cockboat bobbing at an anchor;
 Playing with patereroes that *alarm*,
 Yet scorn to do a bit of harm.

My satire's blunt—his boasted a keen edge;
 A sugar-hammer mine—but his a blacksmith's sledge.

(*The Works of Peter Pindar, Esq.* In three volumes. London, 1794, vol. II, pp. 346-347).

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THE FABLE OF BELLING THE CAT

The B and C texts of *Piers Plowman* contain the well-known fable of bellling the cat with an obvious application to the political situation in England at the close of Edward III.'s reign.¹ For the earlier history of this fable Professor Skeat's note is inadequate: he merely quotes from Wright's edition that it appeared in the French *Ysopet*. But the story is very much older than the *Ysopet* (which itself, moreover, can hardly be considered a "source" until it is established that the English poet could read French), and it may therefore be of value to have the scattered data brought together.

The earliest known version of the fable is found in the Old Syriac *Kalilah and Dimnah*, which is dated about the close of the sixth century; and runs as follows:

The king of the mice consults with his ministers as to the possibility of freeing themselves from the cats. He himself thinks there must be some means of doing so. Two of his ministers agree with him and are subservient to his wishes, but the third and wiser one gives it as his opinion that an evil of long standing cannot be so easily abolished, and that any attempt to cure it may easily cause a great calamity. This view he confirms by a story. But since the king adheres to his resolution, he yields, and his colleagues bring forward proposals. The proposal of the first one, to hang a bell on every cat as a danger signal, is pronounced by the second to be not feasible. The proposal of the second, to go into the wilderness for a year that people may do away with the cats thus rendered

¹ *Piers Plowman*, ed. W. W. Skeat, Oxford, 1886, B-text, Prol. 146 ff.; C-text, Pass. I, 165 ff.